



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Armenia

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution, as amended December 8, 2005, provides for freedom of religion; however, the law places some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of minority faiths, and there were some restrictions in practice. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has formal legal status as the national church, enjoys some privileges not available to other religious groups.

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Some denominations reported occasional acts of discrimination by mid- or low-level government officials and isolated incidents of police harassment. An amendment to the 2004 law on alternative military service took effect on January 26, 2006, criminalizing evasion of alternative labor service. Conscientious objectors maintained, however, that military control of the alternative labor service amounted to unacceptable military service.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religious groups were ambivalent.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During these discussions, the U.S. government emphasizes to authorities that continued eligibility for the \$235 million Millennium Challenge Compact remains contingent upon the Government's performance in meeting good governance indicators, which include standards of respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,500 square miles and a population of 3 million.

The country is ethnically homogeneous; approximately 98 percent of the population was ethnically Armenian. Many Azeris left the country during the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988 to 1994, increasing the country's religious and ethnic homogeneity. Religious observance was strongly discouraged in the Soviet era, leading to a sharp decline in the number of active churches and priests, the closure of virtually all monasteries, and the nearly complete absence of religious education. As a result, the number of active religious practitioners was relatively low. For many citizens, Christian identity was an ethnic trait, with only a loose connection to religious belief. An estimated 90 percent of citizens nominally belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination with its spiritual center at the Etchmiadzin cathedral and monastery. The head of the church, Catholicos Garegin II (alternate spelling Karekin), was elected in 1999 at Etchmiadzin with the participation of Armenian delegates from around the world.

There were comparatively small communities of other religious groups. There was no reliable census data on religious minorities, and reports from congregants themselves varied significantly. The Government does not provide official figures for numbers of religious adherents, but congregants offered the following unconfirmed estimates: Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate) (120,000); Yezidi, an ethnically Kurdish cultural group whose religion includes elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism (40,000 nominal adherents); unspecified "charismatic" Christian (10,000); Jehovah's Witnesses (8,750); Armenian Evangelical Church (8,000); Molokan, an ethnically Russian pacifist Christian group that split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century (5,000); Baptist (2,000); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (2,000); Greek Orthodox (1,200); Seventh-day Adventist (950); Pentecostal (700); Jewish (600); and Baha'i (200). There was no estimate of the number of atheists.

Yezidis were concentrated primarily in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of the capital, Yerevan. Armenian Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians were concentrated in the northern region, while most Jews, Mormons, and Baha'is were located in Yerevan. In Yerevan there was also a small community of Muslims, including Kurds, Iranians, Indians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Several minority religious groups sponsor missionary programs in the country, including both expatriate and local participants. Levels of membership in minority religious groups remained relatively unchanged.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution, as amended on December 8, 2005, provides for freedom of religion and "the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church in the spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia." The law stipulates some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of faiths other than the Armenian Apostolic

Church. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, including the right either to believe or to adhere to atheism. The 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience, amended in 1997 and again in 2001, establishes the separation of church and state but grants the Armenian Apostolic Church official status as the national church.

Extended negotiations between the Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church resulted in a 2000 memorandum providing a framework for the two sides to negotiate a concordat. Although they had not concluded negotiations by the end of the period covered by this report, the Government and the church used the memorandum as a basis for dispute resolution and policy agreements.

The law requires all religious denominations and organizations to register in order to operate without restrictions. There were no reports of the Government refusing registration to religious groups that were qualified for registration under the law. The Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities, which replaced the former Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), oversees religious affairs and coordinates activities with the cabinet's chief of staff. A high-ranking official from the former CRA serves as the prime minister's advisor on religious affairs. The Office of the State Registrar registers religious entities, and the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities performs a consultative role in the registration process. To qualify for registration, petitioning organizations must "be free from materialism and of a purely spiritual nature," and must subscribe to a doctrine based on "historically recognized holy scriptures." A religious organization must have at least 200 adult members. Religious groups are not required to register, but unregistered religious organizations may not publish newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors. By the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had registered fifty-six religious organizations, some of which were individual congregations within the same denomination.

Yerevan's one surviving eighteenth-century mosque, which was restored with Iranian funding, was open for regular Friday prayers. Although not registered as a religious facility, the Government did not restrict Muslims from praying there.

The law permits religious education in state schools. Only personnel authorized and trained by the Government may teach in schools. The history of the Armenian Apostolic Church forms the basis of this curriculum; many schools cover global religions in elementary school and the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church in middle school. Students may choose not to attend religious education classes. Religious groups are not allowed to provide religious instruction in schools, although registered groups may do so in private homes to children of their members. On occasion, priests from the Armenian Apostolic Church teach classes in religious history; however, the use of public school buildings for religious "indoctrination" is illegal.

The military employs Armenian Apostolic chaplains for each division, but no other religious groups are represented in the chaplaincy.

The Government's human rights ombudsman and the head of the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities met with many minority religious organizations during the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, most registered religious groups reported no serious legal impediments to their activities. However, the 1991 freedom of conscience law prohibits "proselytizing" (undefined in the law) and restricts unregistered groups from publishing, broadcasting, or inviting official visitors to the country. The prohibition on proselytizing applies to all groups, including the Armenian Apostolic Church; however, the term used for proselytizing implies that someone has been taken away from a "true" faith, and the prohibition effectively restricts only minority religious groups.

According to the head of the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities, some minority religious groups, including the Molokans and some Yezidi groups, have not sought registration.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations, the Government has not enforced the ban and considers it unenforceable. A 1991 law required all religious organizations, except the Armenian Apostolic Church, to obtain prior permission to engage in public religious activities, travel abroad, or invite foreign guests to the country. In 2001 this law was rescinded by presidential order and, in practice, no travel restrictions were imposed on any religious denomination.

On July 13, 2005, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) officials reported that police officers briefly detained, harassed, and threatened two foreign missionaries. The missionaries said that one of the officers, after warning them to leave the country, placed the barrel of his unloaded gun against one missionary's head and pulled the trigger. Church officials filed a police report, and the Government opened an investigation. According to the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities, Armenian Apostolic Church officials filed a counter-complaint against the Mormons within a week of the incident, alleging the missionaries were illegally proselytizing on church grounds. Police officials claimed the officers questioned the missionaries and asked them to stay away from the church but denied that the questioning constituted harassment. On October 4, 2005, a police inspector sent Mormon representatives a letter informing members that the national police intended to drop the investigation and leave the incident unresolved. Other religious groups reported isolated events involving police officials questioning missionaries and their acquaintances about their activities.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The law on alternative military service took effect in 2004 and allowed conscientious objectors, subject to government panel approval, to perform either noncombatant military or civil service duties rather than serve as conscripted military personnel. The law was applied to subsequent draftees and those serving prison terms for draft evasion. Conscientious objectors maintained, however, that military control of the alternative labor service amounted to unacceptable military service. An amendment to the law, which took effect on January 26, 2006, criminalized evasion of alternative labor service.

According to leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses in Yerevan, twenty-five members of their religious group remained in prison for refusal, on conscientious and religious grounds, to perform military service or alternative labor service. An additional eighteen members signed statements saying they would not leave the country pending the completion of preliminary investigations, and six more were assigned conditional punishment ranging from one to three years. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated that all of the prisoners were given the opportunity to serve an alternative to military service rather than prison time, but that all refused because the military retained administrative control of alternative service. Twelve of those in prison reportedly received two-year sentences.

There were reports that hazing of new conscripts was more severe for minority group members such as Yezidis and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some Yezidi leaders reported that police and local authorities subjected their religious community to discrimination. Other Yezidi leaders denied the allegations.

There was no officially sponsored violence reported against minority religious groups during the period covered by this report. Other than Jehovah's Witnesses who were conscientious objectors, there were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religious groups were ambivalent.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and, despite doctrinal differences, has friendly official relations with major Christian denominations, including the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and some Protestant churches.

Suppressed through seventy years of Soviet rule, the Armenian Apostolic Church has trained priests and committed material resources to fill the spiritual void created by the demise of communist ideology. Nontraditional religious organizations are viewed with suspicion. Representatives of foreign-based denominations frequently cited as evidence statements including "one God, one country, one church," noting they had been warned against "stealing souls" from the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Societal attitudes toward most minority religious groups were ambivalent. Many citizens were not religiously observant, but the link between religion and Armenian ethnicity is strong.

According to some observers, the general population expressed negative attitudes about Jehovah's Witnesses, because the latter refused to serve in the military, engaged in little understood proselytizing practices, and because of a widespread but unsubstantiated belief that they pay the desperately poor to convert. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to be targets of hostile sermons by some Armenian Apostolic Church clerics and experienced occasional societal discrimination. The press reported a number of complaints for allegedly illegal proselytizing lodged by citizens against members of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some members of the press stoked suspicion of nontraditional religious organizations. On April 4, 2006, an opposition newspaper published a short editorial alleging that "a top police official" had information that "religious sects" including Mormons and Pentecostals had enlisted well-known criminals to protect the "sects'" interests against the Government. The paper's publishers claimed the unnamed source of the article was "credible" and that the allegations were factual, but despite repeated requests, they declined to elaborate on them.

On April 5, 2006, a pro-government tabloid published a short editorial entitled, "Is the American University of Armenia being Mormonized?" The writer claimed that the newspaper had learned from sources that "a Mormon" would be appointed vice rector of the American University. According to the authors, if the rumors were true, the country would have taken a serious step, negative in the tabloid's view, toward "Mormonization."

Flanked by Armenian Apostolic priests during an April 19, 2006, press conference, Armenian Center for Rehabilitation and Assistance to Victims of Destructive Cults Director Alexander Amaryan continued his public assertions that the presence of nontraditional religious institutions "threatens the spiritual life of Armenia." Armenian Apostolic priests alleged "religious sects," which they identified as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, "conquered members of our flock" by "abducting children and church members, and criticizing national traditions."

Unlike in previous years, the Jewish community reported no incidents of verbal harassment during the period covered by this report. On March 18, 2005, a court issued a three-year suspended sentence to the leader of the Union of Armenian Aryans, in response to his conviction on charges of public hostility for calling for the country to be "purified" of Jews and Yezidis.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. ambassador and embassy officials maintain close contact with the Catholicos at Etchmiadzin and with leaders of other religious and ecumenical groups in the country. During the period covered by this report, U.S. officials consistently raised the issue of alternatives to military service with government officials. The embassy also maintained regular contact with resident and visiting regional representatives of

foreign-based religious groups such as the Mormons and raised their concerns with the Government. Embassy officials closely monitor trials related to issues of religious freedom and take an active role in policy fora and nongovernmental organization roundtables regarding religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy hosted several roundtable meetings and receptions in honor of U.S. representatives of religious organizations. Leaders of local minority religious groups were regularly welcomed at these events.

Released on September 15, 2006

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)